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U.S. Will Downplay New Ties with Cuba

By JOHN P. WALLACH

WASHINGTON — The administration has set the stage for a mid-April shift in U.S. Cuban policy, with assists from the Mexican foreign minister and unprecedented, secret use of the U.S. Air Force.

The White House is expected to soft-pedal the policy change largely because of the domestic explosiveness of any action to renew ties with Cuba. The initial step will resemble the economic one taken when the United States first began to seek better relations with Communist China.

Secretary of State Henry Kissinger is expected to announce, in a policy speech when the Organization of American States (OAS) holds its next foreign ministers meeting in Atlanta, that the United States is bowing to the will of many Latin nations to remove trade obstacles, chiefly the 12-year-old OAS embargo.

Kissinger already has informed several Latin foreign ministers that he will reach a decision, before their meeting, on the precipitating issue—the request of the U.S. big-three auto manufacturers and Studebaker-Worthington, in separate deals, for government licenses to make multi-million dollar sales to Cuba. Kissinger has invited the Latin ministers to Washington for “consultations” beginning two days before the Atlanta conclave in April.

The U.S. Air Force last month provided eight officers, including two navigators with colonel rank and several pilots, to fly Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev, aboard his Russian-built jet, to Havana.

This hush-hush operation—with Brezhnev's plane landing at Homestead Air Force Base near Miami both going and coming from Moscow—was ordered by President Nixon to facilitate the Soviet leader's Cuban visit.

Nixon last week also okayed use of a similar Air Force team to fly the Vatican's foreign ministers to Cuba.

Mexican Foreign Minister Emilio Rabasa late Monday sped from Havana to Acapul-

co, with less than a four-hour stopover in Mexico City to brief President Luis Echeverria, so that he could report to the honey-mooning Kissinger on his Cuban mission.

Rabasa's secret intermediary role was mapped during a four-hour meeting in Washington just prior to the Mexican summit of Latin American foreign ministers attended last month by Kissinger.

Rabasa, the first Mexican foreign minister to have visited Cuba in 30 years, spent four days in Havana and conferred twice with Premier Fidel Castro.

Kissinger, after a one-hour White House session with Nixon, indicated to Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko last month that the United States no longer opposed a Latin move to end the embargo. Moscow strongly desires any move that would help end its million-dollar-plus daily bankrolling of the Castro regime.

Gromyko—flying directly from Homestead, courtesy of the Air Force—stopped in Washington after Brezhnev returned to the Soviet capital. While in Havana, the Soviet leader delivered a stern warning to Castro that his days of “exporting revolution” must be ended.

That was interpreted by Cuban analysts here as a clear prodding to Castro to get on with the process of normalizing ties with the United States. The Soviet “gentle shove,” as one official here called it, may in fact have persuaded Castro to make the next move.

In response to numerous administration proddings, Cuba floated what appeared to be a trial balloon earlier this year when Havana's ambassador to Mexico implied only the embargo prevented the start of U.S.-Cuban negotiations.

“We are not in a holy war with the United States,” Ambassador Fernando L. Lopez Muino said. “We would be willing to talk to the United States, given a single and irrevocable condition—that it end the blockade of Cuba.”

It was shortly after this apparent Cuban “feeler” that Kissinger met for four hours

with Rabasa, the Mexican go-between. In 1961 Mexico was the only OAS member to resist U.S. pressure to break relations with Castro's Socialist government.

“The ingredients are most intriguing,” a high State Department official said when asked about the meaning of these developments. He disclosed only that the auto deal had gone to the White House, where Nixon reportedly will make the final decision.

“The atmosphere has been created to force a decision,” the official said. “The Latins are expecting to be told something when they come here for two days of talks before the Atlanta session. Kissinger implied, if not actually committing himself, to a decision before they meet again.”

The sales by American corporate subsidiaries in Canada and Argentina are thought likely to take place, with or without Washington's consent. Like the China model, more trade would be seen as a step toward eventual diplomatic relations or what Latin specialists call bringing Cuba back into the Western Hemisphere's “family of nations.”

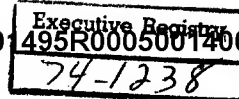
The embargo on trade with Cuba was proclaimed by President John F. Kennedy on Feb. 3, 1962, “in light of the subversive” activities “publicly proclaimed” by the “Sino-Soviet government of Cuba.”

Under the Trading-with-the-Enemy Act, the embargo applies to foreign subsidiaries of U.S. corporations as well as to the parent companies. American directors of those subsidiaries are said to be liable to the act's penalties of 10 years in prison and \$10,000 fine.

The \$150 million sale of 44,000 cars and trucks would be made by Argentine plants of Chrysler, Ford and General Motors as part of a \$1.2 billion trade agreement between Argentina and Cuba.

The \$14 million deal for 25 new diesel locomotives and the reconditioning of nine old ones involves M.L.W.-Worthington, Ltd., of Montreal. It is 50 per cent owned by Studebaker-Worthington, Inc. of New Jersey.

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